Throughout history, cultures across the globe have celebrated the benefits of being in nature. Poets have espoused it’s merits and scientists have confirmed these musings. Humans evolved amongst the flora and fauna, but now 70% of us live in urbanized areas, only increasing our body, mind and soul’s biological need for nature.

Studies have confirmed that spending time within a forest setting reduces blood pressure, anxiety, stress hormones and hostility, while a the same time improving sleep, increasing vigor, as well as stimulating creativity and problem solving abilities. In one study, people improved their creativity scores by 50 percent after just three days in nature. (we always knew camping was good for us!).

Surrounded by nature, people’s brains operate much like a brain on a sedative, with the calming influence, yet, without the detrimental cognitive effects. Utilizing brain imaging, this research confirmed the calm clarity that many report while in and after being in nature.

Boosts in immunity also occur, including an inhibition of the release of stress hormones and an increased functional activity of antiviral cell and intracellular anticancer proteins (collectively known as “killer cells”). Additionally, phytoncides (essential oils secreted by trees) have been associated with improvements of immune defenses.

The first US study finding significant results in this topic occurred in 1984 where post-op patients who received an identical surgery were compared based upon the location of their recovery room. One set of patients had a view of grass and trees from their rooms and the other group, bricks from an adjacent building. The patients with the view of nature had significantly shorter hospital stays, fewer post-surgical complaints, and used less potent analgesic medications (over the counter vs. narcotics) than those with the view of bricks. Amusingly, patients with a natural view also had fewer negative comments written by nurses in their charts.

Don’t have a nice view at work? That’s ok, additional studies have confirmed that the mere presence of flowering and foliage plants inside can make a difference. Research out of Norway indicates that having a plant at or within view of an office workstation significantly decreases the risk of sick leave.

Perhaps the most evidence for the benefits of spending time in nature comes out of Japan, where the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries maintains 48 officially designated forest therapy trails for the practice of shinrin-yoku. This term translates to “Forest Bathing” and has been promoted by the Japanese government since 1982. Recently, Japanese researchers compared subjects walking for two hours in the forest with subjects walking two hours in a city environment and compared before and after
blood samples. Over 90 percent of subjects walking in the woods had a 50 percent increase in “killer cells” as opposed to the city walkers which showed no difference in these protective cells which play a vital role in fighting viruses and tumors. Scientists postulate that this increase is stimulated by phytoncides, essential oils/chemicals found in the wood of trees that help protect it from rotting and insects. Astonishingly, the effects were found to last about a month—so just two hours in nature a month can significantly boost your immunity. We are so fortunate to work in such a beautiful setting with a beautiful urban forest right here on campus. Consider dedicating just two of your 15 minute breaks each week to exploring the Arboretum...for your health and for your work performance!

UC Davis Arboretum Gardens
Map of the Arboretum
Squirrels of UC Davis FB page
Ducks of UC Davis FB page

View this video for a short introduction to Forest Bathing. At the very least, check out this site for free photos to use a screen savers—even images of nature have a small positive effect on your well-being.